

## Coming of Age in Times of Epidemics: Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever 1793*

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### Abstract

The frenzy caused by the horrific news on the TVs and the social media about COVID19 brings to the forefront the catastrophic epidemics in the past that led to mass deaths and haunt the imagination of historians and public alike. Works of fiction often depict the disastrous consequences of these epidemics, both real and imagined, focusing on the gothic experience the characters endure and their struggle to survive the disasters. This article explores this major issue in a contemporary novel, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever 1793* (2000). It chronicles the journey of the female protagonist and her struggle to survive and achieve autonomy during the historical yellow fever that hit Philadelphia more than two centuries ago, which stuck to the memory of people to the current day.

*Keywords:* Bildungsroman, epidemics, fever, Philadelphia, maturity

### Introduction: The Coming-of-Age Novel

Also known as the Bildungsroman, the Coming-of-Age novel is the story of formation or character development. This novelistic tradition was initiated by German writers, namely Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), during the eighteenth century. It is mainly used in young-adult novels and is not necessarily a quest novel in which the immature protagonist undergoes a journey at his/her own choice. Instead, it is a story that "recounts the development (psychological and sometimes spiritual) of an individual from childhood to maturity, to the point at which the protagonist recognizes his or her place in the world" (Murfin and Ray 2003: 39).

This fictional sub-genre has some of the characteristics of the Spanish picaresque, or the novel of adventure. The journey the main character experiences

is always fraught with obstacles and hardships and “each crisis the hero endures helps to deepen his self-knowledge and strength” (Milne 2009: 71).

One characteristic feature of this tradition is that it has a psychological depth as it sheds light on the inner side of the character and traces his/her psychological maturity. “The Bildungsroman,” Ira Mark Milne defines, “intends to lead the reader to greater personal enrichment as the protagonist journeys from youth to psychological or emotional maturity” (2009: 64). The progress of the central character, Milne adds, comes through a hard, yet formative, journey:

Traditionally, this growth occurs according to a pattern: the sensitive, intelligent protagonist leaves home, undergoes stages of conflict and growth, is tested by crises and love affairs, then finally finds the best place to use his/her unique talents. (Ibid.)

A sub-category of this tradition is the female Bildungsroman, also known as the ‘Frauenroman’ of which Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a notable example. These are stories that deal with “gender issues in a patriarchal society” (Milne 2009: 72). They, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar maintain, do not emphasize “the necessity of female submission for female survival” (1984: 155). Instead, the novelist presents the experience of a female protagonist, especially in an oppressive culture that marginalizes her, as she “embarks upon a quest of self-discovery, of discovering things she has known but cannot yet act upon” (Labovitz 1986: 150). These narrative journeys offer “a realistic understanding of female need for agency and assertiveness” (McWilliams 2009: 17-18).

In her struggle to improve her status in a man-dominated world, the protagonist rejects the patriarchal notion of the home as the proper place for women. In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989), Rita Felski states that in female Bildungsroman fiction, “self-discovery and emancipation is depicted as a process of moving outward into the public realm of social engagement and activity, however problematic and fraught with difficulties this proves to be” (127). Her ultimate maturity and independence are achieved not necessarily through marriage, but through a hard journey towards selfhood and identity, despite the limited opportunities and strict gender boundaries. Most of the times the protagonist gets spiritual and moral guidance and psychological and emotional support not from the men in their lives but from the female bond they establish and the sisterly solidarity that ensues. Labovitz states that such “model of the female community offers an alternative form of intimacy grounded in gender identification” (248).

### Literature Review

*Fever 1793* (2000) is a historical novel that brings to the contemporary reader the catastrophic memory of the yellow fever that afflicted the Philadelphians during the summer of 1793, when Philadelphia was the official, temporary capital of the United States. The novel is explicitly addressed to young readers with its focus on the trials of fourteen-year-old Matilda (Mattie) Cook, and her journey of survival and maturity during the time of the disastrous disease.

Little has been written about the novel. Most of the few references that briefly evaluate the text are either study guides for American students, or reviews written immediately after the publication of the novel. The scarcity of critical material on the novel and its focus on the historical yellow fever make the text a virginal field of research. This study traces the development of the adolescent female protagonist which she achieves through her life-and-death journey during the epidemic. It highlights not only the negative consequences of the epidemic on the life of the central character, but also the positive side of this adversity, which is her maturity. This is important as contemporary people, afflicted by COVID19, are so pessimistic and expect only the tragic sides at the end of the dark tunnel of pandemic they endeavor to escape.

### **The Beginning of Mattie's Journey**

*Fever 1793* opens on Mattie trying to help her mother, Mrs. Lucille Cook, who runs a coffeehouse with her father-in-law, Captain Cook, a former Revolutionary War veteran and the head of the Cook household. Her father died when she was a baby, leaving her to the care of her mother and grandfather. Anderson gives her protagonist a voice to allow her to communicate her own experience. She sums up the reason behind her choice of a first-person narrator, saying:

Early drafts of *Fever 1793* were written in the third-person point of view. I thought it would be arrogant to assume that I could speak authentically in the voice of a character two centuries removed from my perspective. (2001: 44)

Through this direct confessional style the reader is given a chance to observe the speaker's feelings, her trials, and her subsequent development into an independent woman. This is a common style in Bildungsroman novels in which the authors distance themselves and avoid authorial intrusion into the events.

Mattie complains of the stiff manners of her mother who runs the house and the family business with an iron hand: "Life was a battle, and Mother a tired and bitter captain. The captain I had to obey" (*Fever 1793*: 17). As Abel et al point out the female protagonist in Bildungsroman novels keep "faith in the possibility of development" (1983: 14). Though she does not like the backbreaking work in the coffeehouse, Mattie has ambitions to run her own business, something obvious in her daydreams:

I was going to travel to France and bring back fabric and combs and jewelry that the ladies of Philadelphia would swoon over. And that was just for the dry good store. I wanted to own entire city block – a proper restaurant, an apothecary, maybe a school, or a hatter's shop. No one would call me little Mattie. They would call me "Ma'am". (*Fever 1793*: 12)

She is unable to see why her mother is ashamed of her work as the landlady of the coffeehouse, serving food and drinks to customers, and why she regards business as an improper thing for a woman. She dreams of running the coffeehouse on her

own and of impressing her mother and grandfather with her professional management of the family business:

I imagined Mother's face when she arrived home and found what a splendid job I had done running the coffeehouse. I could just picture it – I would be seeing the last customers out the door when Mother would come up the steps. She would exclaim how clean and well-run the coffeehouse was. Grandfather would point out the fancy dry goods store I was building next door. I would blush, looking quite attractive in my new dress – French, of course. (*Fever 1793*: 117-18)

However, as typical female Bildungsroman characters, like Mattie are “restricted by the domestic parameters of the time” (Milne 2009: 73). Speaking about the genesis of her novel and the story in the making, Anderson describes Mattie, saying:

Mattie was a Daughter of Liberty, that first generation of America women who grew up in an independent nation. As befitted a young girl of her age and class, she had some education and knew how to work very hard. She was in conflict with her mother, at odds with her own body, and wondering about her future. The concept of a ‘teenager’ may be a 20<sup>th</sup>-century construct, but the transition between childhood and adulthood was real for girls like Mattie. (Anderson 2001: 44)

As a teenager, Mattie is often thwarted by the domestic chores assigned to her by her mother. She tries to escape and is always seeking excitement. She acts like a child, trying to escape the stifling environment of her home and finding an outlet in her dreams near the docks – dreams of escaping Philadelphia by sailing off to France. In Paris, she imagines, she will be away from her mother's reprimands and she can be free of any responsibility. Her mother urges her to behave like a lady. She used to remind her of the generation gap between them. She also tells her about the accomplishments girls of her age were accustomed to in the past, unlike the careless girls of Mattie's generation:

I groaned. Mother had been a perfect girl. Her family was wealthy then, but that didn't stop her from stitching entire quilts before breakfast, or spinning miles of wool before tea. It was the War, she liked to remind me. Children did what was asked of them. And she never complained. Oh, no, never. Good children were seen and not heard. How utterly unlike me. (*Fever 1793*: 2)

She feels entrapped and aspires to have a new identity away from any social stricture. She views her life as a prison that she dreams to escape which is symbolized by the balloon that is set free from the state prison:

A few blocks south lay the Walnut Street Prison, where Blanchard had flown that remarkable balloon. From the prison's courtyard it rose, a yellow silk bubble escaping the earth. I vowed to do that one day, slip free of the ropes that help me. (*Fever 1793*: 4)

Rita Felski notes that in the Coming-of-Age novel, romance and marriage do not “contribute to the protagonist's education” (1898: 131). Likewise in *Fever*

1793, the protagonist does not seek development through marriage to a wise and mature husband. Early signs of her independent spirit are demonstrated in her objections to her mother's and grandfather's plans of finding a suitable husband for her. She complains: "I don't need a husband to run the coffeehouse" (*Fever 1793*: 44). In an attempt to find a suitable match for Mattie, her mother does her best to make her look elegant and advises her to stick to the conventional feminine behavior and accomplishments. One such instance is when Mrs. Cook and Mattie are preparing to visit their rich neighbors, the Ogilvies, who have young sons eligible for marriage. Mattie is dressed in fine clothes to make her look attractive, something that she does not like as it represents the restrictive social environment epitomized in this tight dress:

By the time they had tightened, pinned, and locked me into my clothes, I could feel my stomach rubbing against my backbone. Mother pulled my arms back until my shoulder blades touched, the proper pasture for a lady.

"She looks like a china doll," observed Grandfather as we departed.

"I will break just as easily," I muttered. (*Fever 1793*: 44)

Even when some of the customers in the coffeehouse suggest that marriage is a better thing for Mattie than working in the coffeehouse, Mattie is inwardly dissatisfied with the suggestion, but she is too shy to object:

"Can that be little Mattie?" elderly Mr. Carris asked as he squinted through his bifocals. "Why, she's grown into a fine young lady. Much too fine for this type of work. We'll have to find a husband for you."

"A husband! A husband!" squawked King George [the parrot].

My face flushed as the men laughed.

"Hush, you old thing," I muttered to the bird. It would have been rude to hush Mr. Carris. "I'll feed you to Silas [the cat] if you don't close that beak" (*Fever 1793*: 19).

In patriarchal societies, Judith Halberstam argues, "adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression" for girls (2004: 938). What makes Mattie a typical Bildungsroman heroine is her efforts to get her "freedom without hindrance" (Labovitz 1986: 248). Mattie prefers the life of an outsider, a woman who behaves freely, who can roam the market on her own and who refuses to be confined within the domestic realm. She has the free and rebellious spirit of her grandfather, who encourages her to be herself, though he sometimes objects to some of her defiant acts, like when she meets and talks to Nathaniel Benson, a young man with whom she has an emotional attachment.

### **The First Real Challenge: The Epidemic**

The domestic, cozy scene in the coffeehouse at the beginning is quickly disturbed by death and chaos as the city is devastated by the yellow fever epidemic. The townspeople panic as the news of an unknown disease spread among them. Mattie is shocked by the news of the loss of her friend and playmate, Polly, a servant girl, who died of the newly rampant fever. Initially, Mattie cannot understand why her mother is so unsympathetic with Polly's poor family when she refuses to send them

some meat as a kind of solace for their loss of their daughter, who was the provider for her family. Her mother's carelessness and sense of superiority is obvious as she justifies, saying: "The girl was our servant, not a friend" (*Fever 1793*: 16). Mrs. Cook does not even give Mattie permission to visit Polly's family, something that Mattie insists on, viewing it as a kind of respect to her dead friend and solidarity for the diseased girl's family. Still, the mother rejects her daughter's plea because she is anxious about Mattie's safety, fearing that she might catch infection during the visit.

Following Polly's death, Mattie realizes how her duties and responsibilities increase as she has to take Polly's place in the coffeehouse. She watches the fear in the streets as she helps her mother in the coffeehouse and "identifie[s] with those feelings of panic and disaster and being out of control and the world suddenly not being safe" (Anderson 2009: 31). As she roams streets in the market, doing daily errands, Mattie listens to the townspeople exchanging rumors about the mysterious epidemic. They are terrified whenever the church bell tolls:

Bong. Bong. Bong.

A little boy sitting on the cobblestones covered his ears. The chattering marketplace voices hushed as the ringing continued. Every face turned toward the bell swaying in its tower.

"Another person dead," said the butcher. ... "The bell rings once for each year the person lived," he explained. (*Fever 1793*: 32)

The number of the casualties and dead increase every day and everyone is frightened because the nature of the disease is still unknown. The panic intensifies as the wealthy people flee the city "to escape contagion" (Burkham 2000: 562).

Mattie's second difficult experience following the loss of Polly is her mother's sickness, which is a turning point in her life. She is able to see that her mother's demanding and controlling nature is just the outcome of her desire to see her daughter happy, safe, and settled. Mrs. Cook is brought home by a stranger on a wheel cart, obviously fragile and burning with fever. It is the first time Mattie sees her strong mother so weak and dependent on others. Terrified, she passively watches her grandfather carrying her faint mother inside the coffeehouse and listens to a doctor, whom she does not trust, telling them that her mother's sickness is not the fever that is killing people in the city. She expresses her feelings of pain as she sees her mother suffering from the fever:

Mother shivered so hard, her teeth rattled. Even with all the blankets in the house on her, she could not warm. She lay under the faded bedding like a rag doll losing its stuffing, her hair a wild collection of snakes on the pillow, her cornflower blue eyes poisoned with streaks of yellow and red. It hurt to look at her. Tears threatened again. I sniffed and tried to control my face. No one could ever tell what Mother thought or felt by looking at her. ... I leaned over to kiss her forehead. A tear slipped out before I could stop it. (*Fever 1793*: 68)

She observes her mother vomiting blood during the night as the "pestilence boils within her blood" (*Fever 1793*: 72). Even in this critical moment as her life is at

stake, Mrs. Cook is anxious about her daughter's safety. When Mattie tries to help her, she sends her out of the room, fearing that she might get infected.

Before leaving the town, she reviews the images of devastation that the epidemic triggers as she roams the streets. She also contemplates her existence as the fever epidemic intensifies, and the possibility of being infected and dead: "what did it feel like to die? Was it a peaceful sleep? Some thought it was full of either trumpet-blowing angels or angry devils. Perhaps I was already dead" (*Fever 1793*: 86). As death throws its shadows on the people, Mattie realizes how she was irresponsible in the past and even feels guilty for being careless: "There could be no running from this [death]. Hiding from death was not like hiding from Mother when she wanted me to scrub kettles, or ignoring Silas [the cat] when he begged for food" (*Fever 1793*: 151).

### **Outside Philadelphia: Mattie's Journey of Survival**

Mattie is forced to leave her sick mother against her will when another doctor declares that Mrs. Cook is infected with yellow fever. Fearing that her daughter might be infected, Mrs. Cook thinks of sending Mattie to a farm in the countryside, outside the city. Her journey of survival enables her to see the best and worst aspects people can manifest in such turbulent times. She sees how people in such times of crises abandoned their loved ones and dispensed with their bodies without even burying them, just to escape infection: "Yesterday a physician I shall not name diagnosed yellow fever in an elderly woman. Her family threw her into the street. She died, but she didn't have yellow fever. It was all a mistake" (*Fever 1793*: 66). As she sets off on the journey to the countryside outside Philadelphia with her grandfather, she urges the wagon driver to stop so that she could help a sick man on the road:

"It's a man. Stop the wagon, we must help him!"

"He is past help, Miss," the driver said as he urged on the horses. "I checked him on the way out to fetch you this morning. He were too far gone to go to the hospital. His family tossed him out so as they wouldn't catch the fever. The death cart will get him soon for burying." (*Fever 1793*: 119)

Later, Mattie sees how the wagon driver threatened to put off her coughing grandfather, suspecting him of being infected. This means that she has to travel by herself and to leave her sickly grandfather alone on the road. Meanwhile, Mattie and her grandfather are threatened by some men who are keeping a vigil on the border of the next town to prevent infected newcomers to get into their town, fearing the spread of the disease. They observe that grandfather has signs of infection and refuse to admit him into the town. Ultimately, they are both violently abandoned by the farmer when the grandfather starts to show clear symptoms of the disease: "The farmer grabbed me under the arms, pulled me from the wagon, and threw me onto the road. He and the doctor lifted Grandfather and deposited him beside me" (*Fever 1793*: 82). Mattie is astounded by the selfishness of the farmer, who gives them up, just to allow himself and his family to be admitted into town:

“They aren’t my family,” the farmer said as he motioned for his wife to climb aboard. “They only rode in back the last mile or so. They was walking and we picked them up.”

“He’s lying!” I shouted ... I stared, mouth open, as the wagon disappeared into a cloud of dust. Our food, our clothing – gone. This couldn’t be happening. (*Fever 1793*: 83)

This is the most difficult challenge young Mattie faces in her life. She has no one to help her take care of her grandfather when he succumbs to fever. She makes use of her grandfather’s lessons of survival, using his military experience as a guide:

“There,” he sighed. “That’s better. It’s time to review your soldiering lessons.”

I groaned. From my crawling days, Grandfather has taught me all the tricks of the American and the British armies, and quite a few from the French. Again and again. It would do no good to argue. I was his captive. (*Fever 1793*: 79)

When the old man’s health began deteriorating during their journey back to their hometown, Mattie leads him under a tree and begins searching for food and water: “I gathered as many pears as I could carry and set off with new energy to find Grandfather. With food, we could hold out for days” (*Fever 1793*: 94). Though she tries to be calm, she is frightened by her grandfather’s bad condition. She makes her way to a nearby farm to buy some food and blankets, but the villagers refuse to help her as they suspect her of having the infection.

After she faints out of fever and is taken to a hospital, all she thinks about is the wellbeing of her loved ones: her mother, Nathaniel, and Eliza (a free black woman, who used to help her mother run the coffeehouse). She realizes that she has been in the hospital for ten days. She is overjoyed to see her recovering grandfather by her side. Her grandfather always provides her with strength and confidence, especially in these critical times. She admires her grandfather’s courage and resourcefulness in helping the doctors, after being fully recovered, preparing food for the sick and burning the beddings of recovered individuals. Mr. Cook also objects to sending Mattie to an orphan home, though Mrs. Bowles, who is responsible for the orphanage, tries to convince him that “the orphan house may be the safest place for her” (*Fever 1793*: 11).

Mattie is disappointed by the limited prospects available for an orphan girl. She listens with awe and pity to Mrs. Bowles who tells her about the fate of an orphan girl, Susannah, who is not accepted into the orphanage because of being “too old to be treated as a child” (*Fever 1793*: 117). Susannah’s chances of a good life depend on her beauty and her ability to marry and settle after losing her parents to the epidemic, as Mrs. Bowles explains:

[Susannah’s] parents owned a small house. The trustees will sell that and use money for her dowry – we will hire her out to work as a servant or scullery maid. She’s attractive enough. I’m sure she’ll find a husband. (*Fever 1793*: 117)

Mattie becomes anxious about her fate and the survival of her mother as this will affect her future and she dreams of autonomy:



If Mother was dead, I'd have to sell the coffeehouse, or have the orphan's court sell it for me. I'd get work as a scullery maid, or move into the orphanage and do laundry. (*Fever 1793*: 215)

Thinking deeply of the situation, Mattie regains confidence in herself and exclaims: A scullery maid? Ridiculous. I was Matilda Cook, daughter of Lucille, granddaughter of Captain William Farnsworth Cook, of the Pennsylvania Fifth Regiment. I could read, write, and figure numbers faster than most. I was not afraid of hard work. I would set my own course. (*Fever 1793*: 215)

This will highly influence Mattie's future decision of running the coffeehouse instead of having to face a similar fate. Mattie also refuses to work in the orphanage because her dreams of independence surpass any attempt to confine her within the expectations of society.

### **Back into Philadelphia: More Tragedies**

Back into the city, Mattie and her grandfather are horrified to see how the place is afflicted by death, hunger, and lawlessness: "How could the city have changed so much? Yellow fever was wrestling the life out of Philadelphia, infecting the cobblestone, the trees, the nature of the people. Was I living through another nightmare?" (*Fever 1793*: 119). Arriving at their home, they are heartbroken to see that the coffeehouse has been deserted and ruined from inside. Everything has been stolen and nothing is left but the pieces of broken potteries that are scattered on the kitchen floor. Besides, Mrs. Cook and Eliza are missing with no signs of their whereabouts. Still, Mattie keeps hope that the circumstances will improve and there will be family reunion:

The house is still standing. We're alive. Mother and Eliza must be somewhere safe, I had to believe that. The fever would soon be over, and our lives would return to normal. I just had to stay clever and strong and find something to eat. (*Fever 1793*: 126)

Mattie takes it as her own responsibility to deal with food shortages and supplies and to take care of her grandfather, who is now so broken by the scene of the destruction of their home and business. She cleans and arranges everything and tries to revive the dying vegetable garden by watering what is left, despite her hunger and the sad memories the dying garden evokes in her:

The garden looked dead. Insects had devoured most of the leaves and vegetables leaving behind skeletons of stems and branches. Weeds had exploded between the neat rows. All those weeks of backbreaking work had been for nothing. Hot tears threatened, but my grumbling stomach was more painful. (*Fever 1793*: 127)

Mattie contemplates her chances of survival as she is now alone in this chaotic place and turbulent time. She finds herself helpless and has to depend on herself. Her grandfather warns her against stepping outside the fence of the house. He senses the danger outside and the frenzy and lawlessness the epidemic engenders. They are attacked by thieves overnight. When her grandfather falls, it is

Mattie who defends him, making use of her grandfather's military training of self-defense:

"Let go of him!" I shouted.

The man ignored me. His hands were around Grandfather's throat. Grandfather weakly hit back at the man, but it had no effect. The man struck Grandfather's head against the floor. Grandfather's eyelids fluttered, then closed.

"Nooo!" I screamed I swung the sword and gashed the thief's should. He howled and rolled to the side, grasping at the bloody wound.

"You cut me," he said in disbelief. "The wench cut me with the sword."

"Get out of my house, before I cut out your heart." I raised the sword and ran at him. (*Fever 1793*: 145)

Helpless and alone after her grandfather died in the fight, she is obliged to wake him all the night. Besides, she loads his body on a cart and takes him to the graveyard, where she guarantees a respectable burial for him and orders the gravediggers to treat him with respect when they try to throw the shrouded corpse into an open grave.

Later, Mattie learns that more than twenty thousand people have died in the town since the onset of the epidemic. She endures the violence and chaos in the streets just to be free from institutional and domestic restrictions. Besides, she takes a little orphan, Nell, whom she finds wandering the empty streets alone. Searching for Eliza in the fearful, deserted streets of the town, Mattie and the child are attacked by a drunken man and she fights back to save herself and the child.

A female bond, similar to that of Eliza and Mattie, is a distinctive feature of the female Bildungsroman. Eliza serves as the mentor in traditional Bildungsroman novels. It is Eliza who provides Mattie with the maternal support and emotional solace she so badly needs after losing her family. She feels confident in her company and experience during this time of distress. Mattie learns from Eliza how to take care of Nell and tend to the sick people. She tries to explain to Eliza that she is no longer the little girl she has been prior to her departure to the countryside:

"Please, Eliza...I know you think I'm a child, bigger than Nell, but a baby still, and that I need someone to tell me to wash my face and finish my bread." I struggled to control my voice. "I'm not a little girl. I can take care of myself." (*Fever 1793*: 175)

She devotes all her time and efforts to help Eliza take care of her bereaved brother's twin sons after their mother died of fever. She also nurses the twin back to health in the coffeehouse.

Eliza senses the drastic transformation of Mattie from a careless adolescent into a caring person as she listens to Mattie:

"I'm not going anywhere. The work will go faster if you have me there, and you shouldn't walk home alone after dark."

Eliza raised an eyebrow.

"Never knew you to look for extra work. Come along then." (*Fever 1793*: 196)

Mattie's endless devoted work makes her unable to find enough time to rest or to have peace of mind as, in her own words, "Night melted into day. Day surrendered

to night...I was never going to stop. We would suffer endlessly, with no time to rest, no time to sleep” (*Fever 1793*: 203-4). She is tormented by the tragic scenes she observes as she actively helps nursing the sick:

The sights and smells of Eliza’s patients were no worse than Bush Hill [the yellow fever hospital, where the sick Mattie has been nursed], but I was not prepared for the heartache. Walking into the homes of strangers, sitting on their furniture, and drying the tears of their children was harder than cleaning up the sick. A dying woman in a cot surrounded by strangers was sorrowful, but a dying woman surrounded by her children, her handiwork, the home where she worked so hard, left me in tears. (*Fever 1793*: 191)

Moreover, at the end of the novel, Mattie becomes an independent young woman, who is able to defend herself and to protect others. When she helps Eliza nursing children in her coffeehouse, she manifests enough courage which shows her ability to fight any thief or intruder during the night:

Eliza pulled a knife from the waistband of her skirt. “If they try again, we’ll be ready.”

Once that would have shocked me, but no longer. I picked up the sword and hung it over the fireplace. We would keep the children safe. (*Fever 1793*: 202)

Mattie does not accept any subordinate position and struggles to free herself from the traditional prescribed gender roles. Her fears of being forced to marry and to depend on the protection and charity of others come true when she listens to Joseph’s, Eliza’s brother, suggestion of finding her a suitable husband and selling her family’s coffee house: “This business needs to be sold for Mattie’s dowry” (*Fever 1793*: 223). This also influences her final decision to take Eliza as her full partner in the coffeehouse since she does want to have a male partner and since Eliza is so protective of her and have enough experience to help her manage her business. Her mother’s return at the end provides her with hope not only because of her love of her mother, but also because no one will be able to force her to sell the coffeehouse and to marry a man who may accept this marital match just for the dowry she will be able to pay.

In an interview with *Voices of Young Advocates*, Anderson states that “while researching ... *Fever 1793*, I learned a great deal about the dreams of women of that period, and how they thought and spoke” (2000, 27). Both Mrs. Cook and Eliza are widows, but they have the freedom and strong will to lead an independent life, despite all the limitations in their patriarchal society. They do not revolt against this man-dominated system, but they refuse to be treated as being inferior to their male guardians. This matriarchal bond is fundamental in the development of Mattie’s character. It serves as a guide to Mattie to act properly and courageously during the critical times of the epidemic.

### **The End of the Journey: Mattie’s Transformation**

Mattie’s difficult journey comes to an end with a mature Mattie and a family reunion when Mrs. Cook finally returns home. Mattie survives, but at the end she is

a new person, different from the immature and irresponsible girl she was when the novel opens. In female Bildungsroman novels, Rita Felski notes, the “key transformation of the text takes the protagonist from this stage of alienation, of sense of lack, to a conscious affirmation of gendered identity” (Felski, 130). Mattie’s transformation from a teenager into an independent young woman is fulfilled, thanks to her potential and resourcefulness and the experience of her mature substitute mother, Eliza. It is with Eliza that she is able to attain independence and to rely on herself. When the epidemic comes to an end and the surviving townspeople start to return home, Mattie decides that she and Eliza form a business partnership and reopen the Cook coffeehouse: “Eliza, I want you to be my partner. There’s no one better suited to it no one I can trust. Or who will put up with me” (*Fever 1793*: 224). Her entrepreneurial offer to Eliza suggests her ability to achieve her individuality as a grown-up person.

Mattie’s tolerance and stoicism are exemplified in her ability to come to terms with the tragic circumstances she is forced to endure. She proves to Eliza and the others that she is no longer the irresponsible child she has been, but an equally caring woman. She takes care of herself, her sickly grandfather, Nell, and other sick people and later accepts the responsibility of managing her family’s business. Her hard journey reminds her of the past as it revives inside her memories of the careless little girl she has been:

Early morning was the only time I felt as if there were ghosts nearby, memories of the weeks of fear. That’s when I found myself listening for Polly’s giggle or Grandfather’s voice. Sometimes they felt so close. Close enough to tell me I should stop dawdling and get to work. (*Fever 1793*: 243)

In addition, she is no longer the dreamer she has been at the beginning of the novel, but a practical and down-to-earth woman, who is able to step up to the challenge: “I didn’t have time to dream or plan. I would deal with each hour as it came, one step at a time” (*Fever 1793*: 173). Apparently, she is also the one who will tend to her mother, who is debilitated by the fever and is left an invalid. Meanwhile, she refuses to abandon Nell when the keepers of the overcrowded orphanage refuse to take the child. She accepts to adopt her, despite her young age and few resources and, thus, becomes her surrogate mother and benefactor.

### **Conclusion**

Mattie’s maturity and self-understanding come not only through her conflict with the restrictive social norms, but also through the hard times she tolerates as the city of Philadelphia, her hometown, is struck by yellow fever. Her journey starts as a struggle for survival and ends as a quest of identity which ultimately enables her to step outside the assigned sphere of the patriarchal society that neglects her individuality.

Mattie undergoes change and awareness at the end. Her journey of survival comes full circle with her return to Philadelphia. It helps her find her inner strength and see life in a new way. Through her experience, she also learns how to stoically

endure the loss of loved ones and to defend herself in times of hazards and adversity. She also learns to live on her own and to be responsible for other people.

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## النضج والبلوغ في زمن الاوبئة: رواية وباء حمى عام 1793 للوري هاليس انديرسون نموذجاً

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### المستخلص

لقد كان للهيجان الذي تسببت به الاخبار المخيفة حول وباء كورونا والتي تناقلتها وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي والتلفاز مؤخرًا اثراً جلياً على حياة الناس مما جلب الى الازهان الاوبئة المهلكة في الماضي والتي ادت الى نتائج مأساوية في اعداد الوفيات الامر الذي بقي عالقا في ذاكرة المؤرخين وعامة الناس على حد سواء. ولقد جسدت الاعمال الادبية التبعات الكارثية لهذه الاوبئة, سواء كانت حقيقية او من وحي الخيال, على حياة الناس من خلال تركيزهم على التجربة المرعبة التي يمر بها شخوص الروايات وصراعهم من اجل البقاء في ظل هذه الكوارث. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى استعراض هذه القضية الرئيسية في رواية معاصرة للكاتبة لوري هاليس انديرسون والتي تحمل عنوان وباء حمى عام 1793. كما وتتبع الرحلة العصبية للبطلة اليافعة وسعيها للبقاء وتطورها خلال حقبة وباء الحمى الصفراء التاريخي الذي اصاب سكان مدينة فيلادلفيا الامريكية قبل اكثر من قرنين وبقي عالقا في الذاكرة الى يومنا هذا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: وباء, حمى, فيلادلفيا, رواية التنشئة, النضج